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ABSTRACT

The structure of the "American family" has undergone dramatic change in recent times. This study examined the differential relationship between perceived mate availability and aggregate assessments of sex-ratio in broadly distinctive socio-cultural groupings to determine whether the primary theoretical conceptualizations concerning the role of mate availability are differentially relevant for those groups. One-half of the contents of the 1989 Southern California Social Survey (SCSS) was devoted to the issue of mate availability and its attitudinal and psychological correlates. The sample consisted of adults (N=1,116) with Blacks and Latinos oversampled to provide numbers sufficient for analytical purposes. Two indicators of perceived mate availability were used: perceived availability of the opposite sex and perceived sex ratio. A series of items concerning factors considered by the respondent to be important for a successful marriage were asked. The results suggest that the roots of African American marital decline are more likely to be structural, rather than the result of the devaluing of the institution of marriage. Economic as well as demographic indicators were salient for Blacks. Although multivariate analysis did not provide support for the primacy of economic indicators for Latino marital behavior and expectations, the bivariate comparisons indicated a very dominant male concern with economic readiness for marriage. (ABL)

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The Decline of Marriage among African Americans: Attitudinal Dimensions

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The Decline of Marriage among African Americans: Attitudinal Dimensions

The structure of the "American family" has undergone dramatic change in recent times. Americans in general are marrying much later, divorce rates which increased sharply in the 1970s have stabilized at an historically high level, and remarriage after divorce is less likely for all women (Norton & Moorman, 1987). A substantial decrease in the likelihood of marriage for American women is foreseen (Rodgers & Thorton, 1985; Bloom & Bennett, 1985).

Although these marital trends characterize the American population generally, the magnitude of the changes is most striking among Blacks. The long-established pre-1950 pattern of Blacks marrying earlier than Whites has been replaced by an increasingly divergent pattern of Blacks marrying later than Whites (Cherlin, 1981). Between 1975 and 1985, the proportion of women who had ever married declined sharply from nearly 80% to 65% among Blacks (compared with 89% to 82% among Whites) (Norton & Moorman, 1987). The percentage of women who were divorced increased from 22% to 31% for Black women (compared to from 18% to 27% among Whites, and only 18% to 20% for Hispanic women) (Norton & Moorman, 1987).

There are gender differences, however, with Black female marital behavior undergoing far more rapid change than that of Black males. When Rodgers and Thorton (1985) estimated proportions of groups expected to marry by age 44, they found that between 1970 and 1979 the proportions declined from 97% to approximately 90% for White men and women and Black men. However, the proportion of Black women expected to marry declined from the already low 86% to a remarkable 76%, meaning that one-quarter of the existing population of Black women are not expected to have married by their 44th birthday. Focusing specifically on younger cohorts, Rodgers and Thorton (1985) estimated that 90% of White males and females born in 1954 will have married by their 45th birthday, compared to 86% of Black men and only 70% of Black females.

Clearly, these changes are dramatic and would seemingly portend a significant shift in the basic structure of African American community and family, including increased numbers of female-headed households with no male head, an increased burden of childrearing being placed on women, and an increase in the percentage of women and children living in households with incomes below the poverty level. This research is concerned with the factors contributing to current African American marital behavior and examines the attitudinal dimensions of theories forwarded to explain these changes.

Basic Conceptualizations

Sex ratio imbalance. The first set of theories centers on significant changes in the distribution between the sexes as a possible factor in these shifts in marital patterns. Current American marriage patterns have been explained by demographers as a consequence of a decrease in the availability of marriage partners for female members of the "baby boom" (Glick, Heer, & Beresford, 1963; Rodgers & Thorton, 1985; Schoen, 1983). This shortage of partners is the result of the ever increasing cohort sizes that characterized the post-World War II baby boom years, coupled with the tendency of women to marry men who are two to three years older than they are. Such women were therefore seeking husbands from older but numerically smaller cohorts. Although the Black population was also affected by the "baby boom" marriage squeeze, a much more severe shortage of Black males, due primarily to differential mortality and migration, has been evident since the 1920s (Guttentag & Secord, 1983; Tucker, 1987; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, in press). Furthermore, Guttentag and Secord (1983) have asserted that throughout time, male shortages in particular have been accompanied by higher rates of singlehood, divorce, "out-of-wedlock" births, adultery and transient relationships; less commitment among men to relationships; lower societal value on marriage and the family; and a rise in feminism.

Economics and marital choice. Economically based conceptions of marital behavior examine the impact of Black male joblessness and underemployment on family structure. Wilson and Neckerman (1986) and Darity and Myers (1986/87) have argued that the

increasing economic marginality of Black males makes them less attractive as potential husbands since they are constrained in their ability to perform the provider role in marriage. When the societal inclination for women to marry men of higher (or at least equal) socioeconomic status is coupled with the substantial joblessness, underemployment, and decreasing educational attainment disproportionately characteristic of major segments of the Black male population today, views of the economic incentive associated with marriage may undergo change. These factors reduce the likelihood that marriage will occur as well as undermine the stability of existing partnerships. In partial support of these assumptions, Tucker and Taylor (in press) using data from the National Survey of Black Americans found that marriage among Black men was significantly associated with economic wherewithal.

Theory and research on this question have been dominated by a focus on aggregate level constructs. It remains to be seen, however, whether individual perceptions of the marriage market and constraints on marriage bear a relationship to group level assessments. Also unknown is the extent to which determinants of marital behavior, as perceived by the actors themselves conform to notions developed through aggregate based theorizing. One way to examine the attitudinal correlates of African American decline is to examine attitudinal aspects of marriage in groups evidencing different characteristics with respect to the theories being examined: i.e., sex ratio and economic constraints. The present paper is an attempt to do just that by focusing on marital attitudes of three racial/ethnic groups in Southern California.

In particular, we would argue that White American marital behavior and expectations are influenced to a greater extent by the demographic forces cited by marriage squeeze theorists (per the Baby Boom effect); that local Latino marital behavior and expectations are more influenced by economic forces than by demographic forces (i.e., a shortage of economically viable males, but no shortage of men per se); and that African American marital behavior and expectations are a function of both economic and demographic phenomena. If the impact of these forces are at least additive (i.e., first fewer

men, then those remaining men are economically compromised), we would therefore expect black marriage rates to be more constrained than either of the other groups.

The immediate objectives of this paper are: 1) to examine the differential relationship between perceived mate availability and aggregate assessments of sex-ratio in broadly distinctive socio-cultural groupings, 2) to determine whether the primary theoretical conceptualizations concerning the role of mate availability are differentially relevant for those groups.

Method

Sample

Half the contents of the 1989 Southern California Social Survey (SCSS) was devoted to the issue of mate availability and its attitudinal and psychological correlates by virtue of the primary author's role as the 1989 SCSS Principal Investigator. Conducted in February and March, the sample consisted of 1,116 adult (age 18 and over) residents of Los Angeles, Ventura and Orange counties. Blacks and Latinos were oversampled by a factor of 13 to 1, in order to provide numbers of numbers sufficient for analytical purposes. Although 5% of the sample was of Asian origin and another 3.6% represented "other" ethnic/racial groups or combinations of groups, the present analyses are focused only on Blacks, Whites, and Latinos. Two-thirds of the Latino sample were Mexican-American, with the remaining primarily of Central or South American ancestry. Demographic characteristics of the sample are listed in Table 1.

Procedure

Telephone interviews were conducted using the UCLA Institute for Social Science Research Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system. A simple random-digit-dialed sample was generated for the area codes and prefixes in the survey region.

Measures

Questions analyzed for the present study are listed in Appendix A. Two indicators of perceived mate availability were used: 1) perceived **availability of opposite sex**: for

women/men like yourself, are there not enough, enough, or more than enough men/women and 2) perceived **sex ratio**: how many men do you think there are for every ten women. A series of items concerning factors considered by the respondent to be important for a successful marriage were asked. On the basis of factor analysis, three measures of marital values were extracted from the series: value placed on romantic aspects of marriage (i.e., love, life-long commitment, and fidelity), value placed on background characteristics (social background, religion, and race/ethnicity), and value placed on practical aspects of marriage (i.e., income, sex, good friends). Control variables included age, educational level (a five point measure), and income level of neighborhood (poor, working class, middle class, upper-middle class, and wealthy).

Results

Perceived mate availability.

Table 2 presents the Los Angeles County and the L.A.-Long Beach SMSA sex ratios for persons aged 15 and over for Blacks, Whites and Latinos, as well as perceived mate availability. The results indicate that both Black men and women perceive a substantial shortage of men. Whites and Latinos also see shortages, but to a lesser extent than Blacks. A fair degree of gender consistency across groups exists.

Desire to marry or remarry.

When asked whether "you ever want to marry or remarry," single respondents (i.e., those never married, separated, divorced, or widowed) across all races indicated a strong willingness to become legally attached, despite the substantial differences in actual marital behavior (see Table 2). Although gender differences characterized all races, with men consistently being more desirous of marriage, the greatest discrepancy between men and women was evident among Latinos. Among women, Black women were least likely to express a desire to marry. Still, there existed relative consistency within race, with Latino men being more desirous of marriage than other men, and Latinas wanting to marry more than other women. Whites were least likely to want to marry or remarry.

Marital Values.

When asked directly about the importance of long-term relationships and marriage, there was again considerable similarity in the responses supplied by the three ethnic groups. As shown in Table 1, responding on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being extremely important, means for all three group averaged between 7 and 8.3. There were no significant differences either on the basis of ethnicity or gender.

Reasons for not marrying.

All single persons were asked why they had not married or remarried (see Table 3). As expected, "never found the right person" was the primary response. Women in general believed more than men, that there are not enough persons of the opposite sex who meet their standards, although Black women were most likely to feel this way. Latinas (who enjoy a favorable sex ratio) were least likely among women to report availability concerns as reasons for not marrying; but nearly half of Black men (who also enjoy a favorable sex ratio) reported that there were not enough women who met their standards.

"Not ready to settle down" was cited more by than men than by women. Although all men were more likely to cite not having enough money to support a family, it was a more critical concern among Latino and Black men, and Black women as well.

Only relatively small percentages of all groups did not believe in marriage, but those percentages were lowest overall among Blacks and highest among Latinos. With the exception of the Latino men (who as a group are younger than the rest of the sample) few persons indicated that "having fun playing the field" was a reason for not marrying.

Expectations of Marriage. Tables 4, 5, and 6 present the results of linear multiple regressions of attitudinal and control variables on expectations of marriage or remarriage by ethnic group for single persons only. Analyses were conducted separatedly for men and women. The attitudinal variables made significant contributions to the regression models (with the sole exception of Latino men). The best model in terms of explanatory power

was the White women's model which explained 50% of the variance in marital expectation. The Latino men's model was not viable.

The attitudinal variables displayed very different patterns of association among the groups. Date availability was associated with expectations of marriage only among Whites. [Since perceived sex ratio was not a significant predictor for any group, it was eliminated from the final models.]

Whether the *importance of being married* or the *importance of a long-term involvement* was more central to *marital expectations* differed by group (although moderately correlated, they seem to be measuring distinctly different phenomena). For Black men as well as Latino men, expectations of marriage were distinctly associated with highly valuing the state of marriage (i.e., there is no association with valuing long-term involvement). Among White men, both values were associated with marriage, suggesting that the situations were not as distinct for them. For both Latinas and White women, the importance of long-term involvement plays a greater role than the value placed on marriage in marital expectations; both were central for Black women.

Finally, the belief that having an adequate income was an important factor in marital success (a variable extracted from the "importance of practical aspects of marriage" factor) was a significant predictor of marital expectation for Black men and White women. Those who believed that an adequate income was important were more likely to expect to marry.

Conclusions

These findings suggest that the roots of African American marital decline are more likely to be structural, rather than the result of a devaluing of the institution of marriage. The findings also lend support to our notions about the salience of the different structural constructs for diffent groups--that is, economic versus demographic factors. Economic as well as demographic indicators were salient for Blacks (both structurally and attitudinally); although the multivariate analyses did not provide support for the primacy of economic indicators for Latino marital behavior and expectations, the bivariate comparisons did

indicate a very dominant male concern with economic readiness for marriage. In addition to Black male economic concerns, rather surprisingly, they perceived a shortage of suitable women. We believe this is because Black males whose marriage market value has been enhanced by their scarcity apparently are "choosier" in terms of mate selection [which would fit the Guttentag & Secord (1983) social exchange model predictions--in situations of scarcity, the standards of the sex in short supply get higher]. But because of their economic constraints, Black men are less able to enter into marriage. We should note too, that although a causal ordering is implied by the economic findings (i.e., that poor economic circumstances constrain marital opportunity), it is quite likely that marital status and/or constrained marital opportunity may lead to changes in attitudes concerning the value of marriage.

We conclude that economic and demographic factors separately and jointly affect marital status and marital expectations, acting alternatively as constraints and incentives at different historical moments. It should be kept in mind, however, that the impingement of such structural factors as marital attitudes and behavior also requires examination within the context of sociocultural background factors which may differ for the groups under study and which may produce internal dynamics that result in the changes in marital behavior observed today.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Sample by Ethnicity and Gender

	Blacks		Whites		Latinos	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Sample size	94	176	218	229	102	100
Age (%)						
18-29	41.3	30.8	30.3	21.6	63.7	42.0
30-49	33.7	39.6	38.1	44.1	29.4	40.0
50-64	15.2	18.3	20.6	15.4	5.9	9.0
65+	9.8	11.2	11.0	18.9	2.9	9.0
Population Distribution for persons over aged 19 from 1980 Census: L.A. Long Beach SMSA (%)						
20-29	30.1	30.9	26.8	24.3	41.1	37.5
30-39	41.7	39.5	36.8	33.9	40.1	40.2
50-64	18.7	18.3	23.4	23.3	13.3	15.0
65+	8.8	11.4	13.0	18.4	5.0	7.4
Household Income (%)						
<10,000	9.4	23.3	5.3	10.6	4.3	9.0
10,000-19,999	25.9	25.8	8.3	14.9	26.1	29.2
20,000-29,999	16.5	16.0	16.0	14.9	15.2	23.6
30,000-39,000	22.4	16.6	22.8	17.8	26.1	20.2
40,000-49,000	11.8	7.4	13.1	9.6	15.2	7.9
>50,000	14.1	11.0	34.5	32.2	13.0	10.1
Neighborhood Income Level (%)						
Poor	5.4	15.1	1.9	1.3	2.0	11.3
Working class	48.4	54.1	32.7	22.0	58.4	53.6
Middle class	37.6	26.7	38.8	41.6	34.7	33.0
Upper middle class	12.5	4.1	23.8	27.9	5.0	2.1
Wealthy	0.0	0.0	2.8	2.2	0.0	0.0

Table 2

Family/Relationship Characteristics and Attitudes by Ethnicity and Gender

	Blacks		Whites		Latinos		
L.A. County Sex Ratio (1980 Census)			85.6		91.9		98.8
L.A.-Long Beach SMSA Sex Ratio (1980 Census)	83.5		92.8		97.8		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Perceived Sex Ratio (10 point scale)	4.7	4.8	7.0	6.0	5.2	4.8	
Perceived Mate Availability (%)							
Not enough	15.4	69.4	20.0	59.0	14.1	54.3	
Enough	26.4	20.0	38.5	32.5	46.5	32.6	
More than enough	58.2	10.6	41.5	8.5	39.4	13.0	
Marital Status (%)							
Married	26.9	23.4	48.1	47.6	32.4	43.0	
Separated	6.5	13.7	2.3	1.8	2.9	8.0	
Divorced	15.1	17.1	9.7	13.2	10.8	13.0	
Widowed	3.2	11.4	4.6	13.2	0.0	8.0	
Never Married	48.4	34.3	35.2	24.2	53.9	28.0	
Married or romantically involved (%)	61.4	53.0	65.0	67.8	73.4	62.0	
Want to marry/remarry (%) ("not marrieds" only)	81.3	72.4	79.0	71.8	93.8	76.0	
Importance of long-term involvement (10 point scale)	7.9	7.6	8.3	8.3	8.0	8.3	
Importance of marriage (10 point scale)	7.0	7.1	7.3	7.1	7.3	7.6	
Marital Expectations (10 point scale)	6.6	6.3	6.7	5.7	8.1	6.1	

Table 3

Reasons for Not Marrying Among Unmarried Persons by Race and Gender
(Percent citing Reason)

	Blacks		Whites		Latinos	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Devoted energies to school or work	40.3	22.9	57.1	31.3	63.1	37.5
Not enough men/women who meet standards	47.5	55.6	27.6	51.4	18.5	46.7
Don't want to lose freedom	25.8	26.9	30.7	23.9	41.5	32.6
Don't believe in marriage	6.5	7.3	12.5	5.3	16.9	19.1
Not ready to settle down	48.3	34.6	53.9	41.6	76.9	39.6
Having fun playing the field	16.1	10.1	20.6	15.9	44.6	10.4
Not enough money to support a family	41.9	25.7	36.5	15.9	52.3	18.8
Never found the right person	68.9	66.7	77.0	73.6	55.6	77.1

Table 4

Effects of Attitudinal Variables on Expectations of Marriage by Gender: Blacks

	Women		Men	
	b	Beta	b	Beta
Control Block				
Age	-0.03**	-0.21	-0.04**	-0.28
Income	-0.11	-0.06	0.26+	0.14
No. of Children	-0.35***	-0.23	-0.06	-0.04
R^2 Change	.11		.08	
Attitudinal Block				
Date Availability	0.08	0.08	0.06	0.06
Import of Long-Term Involvement	0.21*	0.22	-0.01	-0.01
Import of Being Married	0.22**	0.25	0.48***	0.54
Import of Adequate Income for Marriage	0.18	0.09	0.25*	0.19
Importance of Marriage for Having Children	-0.22**	-0.19	0.03	0.02
R^2 Change	.18		.30	
Adjusted R^2	.35		.43	

Table 5

Effects of Attitudinal Variables on Expectations of Marriage by Gender: Whites

	Women		Men	
	b	Beta	b	Beta
Control Block				
Age	-0.08***	-0.54	-0.06***	-0.45
Income	-0.17*	-0.11	0.003	0.003
No. of Children	-0.09	-0.05	-0.07	-0.05
R^2 Change	.26		.21	
Attitudinal Block				
Date Availability	0.26***	0.21	0.13+	0.11
Import of Long-Term Involvement	0.25***	0.25	0.22***	0.25
Import of Being Married	0.07+	0.10	0.15**	0.21
Import of Adequate Income for Marriage	0.15*	0.16	0.10	0.08
Importance of Marriage for Having Children	0.05	0.04	-0.05	-0.05
R^2 Change	.14		.18	
Adjusted R^2	.50		.37	

Table 6

Effects of Attitudinal Variables on Expectations of Marriage by Gender: Latinos

	Women		Men	
	b	Beta	b	Beta
Control Block				
Age	-0.0**	-0.36	-0.04	-0.20
Income	-0.19	-0.10	0.11	0.08
No. of Children	-0.07	-0.05	-0.01	0.01
R^2 Change	.15		.04	
Attitudinal Block				
Date Availability	0.03	0.03	-0.12	-0.12
Import of Long-Term Involvement	0.26**	0.29	0.02	0.02
Import of Being Married	0.03	0.04	0.18*	0.27
Import of Adequate Income for Marriage	-0.02	-0.01	0.08	0.08
Importance of Marriage for Having Children	-0.001	-0.001	-0.08	-0.07
R^2 Change	.08		.08	
Adjusted R^2	.31		.05	

APPENDIX A

Selected Measures used in Marriage and Family Subcomponent of the 1989 Southern California Social Survey

Marital Values and Expectations

A1. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 meaning extremely important and 1 meaning not important at all, how important would you say having a long-term romantic involvement is to you?

A2. Using the same scale of 1 to 10, with 10 meaning extremely important and 1 meaning not important at all, how important is being married to you?

A3. Using the scale of 1 to 10 again, how important do you think each of the following is for a successful marriage?

a. love--remember that 10 is extremely important and 1 is not important at all.

b. being faithful (that is, not cheating on your partner by seeing other persons)

c. making a life-long commitment

d. having and raising children

e. being the same race or ethnic group

f. coming from similar social or cultural backgrounds

g. being of the same religion

h. having similar likes and dislikes

i. having an adequate income, that is having enough money

j. having a good sexual relationship

k. being good friends

DERIVED FACTORS:

I. Importance of Romantic Values for Marriage: items A3a, A3b, A3c
II. Importance of Background Characteristics for Marriage: items A3e, A3f, A3g
III. Importance of Practical Aspects of Marriage: items A3i, A3k, A3j

A5. People have many reasons for not getting married (again). Which of the following are reasons that you have never married/remarried?

a. You devoted your energies to preparing for a career (e.g., school, work). Is this a reason that you have never married?

b. There are not enough "decent" men/women

c. You believe that marriage is too restricting--that is, you don't want to lose your freedom.

d. You don't believe in marriage.

e. You are not yet "ready" to "settle down."

f. You are having too much "fun" "playing the field."

g. You haven't been making enough money to support a family.

h. You never found the right person.

i. Is there some other reason you have not married? What is that?

A9. Do you ever want to get married (again)?

A11. On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely do you think it is that you will *ever* marry/remarry? 10 is extremely likely and 1 is very *un*likely.

Mate Availability

D1. For women/men like yourself, that is, women/men about your age with a similar educational and social background, would you say that there are:

a. **not enough** men/women
b. **enough** men/women
c. **more than enough** men/women

D2. Again, for women/men like yourself--about your age with a similar educational and social background--how many men do you think there are for every ten women? _____

Current Relationship

E1. Do you currently have a main romantic involvement--someone you may be in love with?

Income/Economic Level

What was your total household income before taxes in 1987? (6 categories)

What kind of people mainly ive in your neighborhood? Would you say...1) mostly very poor, 2) mostly working class, 3) mostly middle class, 4) mostly upper middle class, or 5) mostly wealthy people?